


Veteran on cross-country walk to promote mental health awareness

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GRANGEVILLE – Jimmy Novak was pushing a stroller full of his belongings down U.S. Highway 95 last week when a car came up behind him. Lacey Graham came out, saying she was glad to have found Novak, and that she had something for him.

“It’s a challenge coin,” said Graham, the warden’s assistant for North Idaho Correctional Institution in Cottonwood. “It a way we recognize people who, through their efforts and contributions, have gone above and beyond the call of duty.”

This spontaneous positive response has not been an uncommon experience for Novak who, on March 22, began a cross-country walk to bring awareness to mental health issues many veterans and their families are struggling with, specifically suicide.

“I’ve always wanted to give back to the veteran community at large, and to others who have suffered,” he said, “because we have significantly higher rates of post-traumatic stress and suicidal thoughts in the veteran community.”

“I’m out here,” he continued, “sharing my own story about anxiety and depression and suicidal thoughts, and to bring some knowledge to the community at large, and hopefully inspire some veterans to seek help, if they need it.”

All total, Novak plans to walk approximately 3,200 miles from where he started in his hometown of DuPont, Wash., to Disney World in Florida. His family – wife, and three teenage children – will meet up with him there around Aug. 22 when he crosses the finish line, and enjoy time together at the park.

Novak’s walk serves a double purpose: for public awareness, and as a way for him to deal with his own history of anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts, which stem from his military service.



Lacy Graham, assistant warden at North Idaho Correction Institution, presented Jimmy Novak, a veteran who began a cross-country walk to raise awareness to mental health issues among veterans, an NICI Challenge Coin.

Photo by David Rauzi - Idaho County Free Press

Novak served in the Army for 21 years, with three overseas duty assignments and three deployments. In 2004, he was at Mosul for the Dec. 21 dining hall bombing at a U.S. military airfield there that killed 14 U.S. soldiers, four Iraqi soldiers and four citizen employees.

“I had a lot of survivors guilt about that. It was a close call,” Novak said. Following, when he wasn’t working or eating, he would sleep the rest of the day. “I developed a plan for suicide, and I started rehearsing my plan in my room when I had time for myself when my roommate was out.”

Something snapped him out of this eventually, “it came on gradually, and one day I stopped.” But the undealt with feelings “faded into the background for a while,” until he came into retirement and those feelings started coming back up.

“I would be at a traffic light, and I felt something was trying to force itself up from my stomach,” he said, “and I’d be weeping uncontrollably. I thought, ‘This is not good,’ and so I finally sought behavioral health.” The Army has continually pushed the message it’s a sign of strength to seek help, but up until then, Novak wasn’t ready.

“When I was in that mindset, I wasn’t prepared to hear it,” he said, “and when I was out of the mindset, I didn’t think I needed it. Talking to someone about that has made a world of difference. Two years ago, I would never have been out here talking about this.”



Dressed for spring weather, Jimmy Novak stands with his stroller full of gear along U.S. Highway 95 just on the north edge of Grangeville last Thursday, April 11. Novak is on a cross-country walk, raising awareness for veterans’ mental health issues.

Photo by David Rauzi - Idaho County Free Press

Since starting his walk, Novak has had a great response from individuals along the route, staying with families along the way, and finding that almost everyone he’s talked with has been directly affected in their lives by these issues he’s raising awareness on.

“People have been wanting to share with me, and that’s a powerful thing,” he said. Heading through Idaho County, he’s had people stop to offer snacks, water, “and they want to give me a hug, which takes some getting used to,” he smiled, “but the support has been pretty overwhelming, and I’m glad people are really connecting to my cause.”

Novak’s route will take him south, destined for Boise this week, with the American Legion planning to transfer him through a trouble section of US95 where the roads are narrow and has been affected by slides and flooding. People can follow his progress through his social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) and a blog at jlnovak.com.

“It’s ok to seek help,” Novak said, is the overall message he wants to convey. “There’s no shame in having post-traumatic stress or wrestling with suicidal thoughts; it’s actually quite common. And there’s a large number of people out here who have similar experiences and want to help.”